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ABSTRACT

Play is pivotal in making inclusion work and in providing learning opportunities for all children in inclusive early childhood settings. The nature of inclusive early childhood settings forces a reexamination of the underlying assumptions about play, its role in child development, and its place within the curriculum. A continuum of interventions and facilitation around play, from more to less directive, with a constructivist approach falling in the middle, may help teachers find the right balance between intervening to promote play and stepping back to allow play to develop naturally. Play has been less emphasized in early childhood special education programs than in regular education programs because children with disabilities often need more than the provision of play opportunities; play is used to reinforce skill development and to foster peer relations. Inclusive settings should use the best of both early childhood and early childhood special education practices and rely on the full range of play perspectives. Play should provide children with opportunities to engage in different types of play at different developmental states in a variety of social configurations. Developmentally appropriate practices with adaptive toys provide the foundation for play in inclusive settings. However, a more active adult role is necessary in an inclusive setting. The practitioner must balance intervention with letting play happen. Facilitating learning through play in inclusive settings requires new collaborations among various professionals and families. Unified professional preparation of early childhood and early childhood special education teachers will facilitate such teaming in inclusive settings. (KDFB)

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The Role of Play in Inclusive Early Childhood Settings

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Today's early childhood settings for three to eight year olds, which include child care programs, Head Starts, public and private preschools, kindergartens, and primary classrooms, are serving an increasingly diverse population of young children. Demographic changes, changes in family life, and renewed focus on federal laws mandating the inclusion of children with special needs in the "least restrictive environment" have brought before us groups of young children with varied needs, abilities, and experiences (Galinsky, 1990). This has led to new challenges for early childhood professionals striving to make settings truly inclusive of *all* children. In our struggle to achieve inclusive early childhood settings, we must not forget the role of play in young children's development and

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must carefully plan how we will use play to facilitate learning for all the children enrolled. Play is a hallmark of early childhood, and most practitioners and scholars agree on its value in the lives of young children (Bredekamp, 1987; Carlsson-Paige and Levin, 1990; Elkind, 1987; Hughes, 1991), including those with special needs (Bricker and Cripe, 1992; Fewell and Kaminski, 1988; Linder, 1990).

However, the ways in which various professionals view and use play in their work with young children have varied tremendously. Some have advocated play that is totally child directed; others have utilized play as a means of instruction; yet others have relegated play to "nonlearning" times. It is our contention that the nature of inclusive settings, because they are relatively new and encompass such a full range of children, forces us to reexamine our underlying assumptions about play, its role in child development, and its place within the early childhood curriculum. Only then can we decide upon its rightful position in inclusive early childhood settings. The commonly held belief that play is a naturally occurring activity better left alone by adults may not be relevant for many of today's young children, especially those with delays and disabilities. Similarly, beliefs that play in and of itself is not a learning experience make little sense in light of the many children whose development flourishes through play. To meet every child's needs, we believe that inclusive early childhood settings must rely on an expansive view of play that is responsive to all children. The purpose of this paper is to explore the role of play in inclusive early childhood settings that serve children aged three to eight, and to describe ways in which early childhood professionals (early childhood educators, early childhood special educators, occupational and physical therapists, speech clinicians, social workers, psychologists, and other specialists), whom we will call "early childhood inclusionists," can foster play in their programs. In the following pages, we will look at various perspectives on play, advocate for a more expansive view, and offer a framework for incorporating this view into inclusive early childhood settings.

Traditional Roles of Play in Early Childhood

Play has long been considered important to the development of young children. Research has shown its benefits in fostering chil-

dren's physical knowledge (Kamaii and DeVries, 1980; Wasserman and Ivany, 1988); logical-mathematical knowledge (Almy, 1984; Kamaii, 1982); and social knowledge (Pellegrini, 1985). Other findings have supported the development of problem-solving skills (Sylva, 1977); symbolic skills (Gardner and Perkins, 1989); and interactional skills (Rubin and Howe, 1985) through play. Practitioner's experience provides more evidence of the value of play. As professionals, we have experienced first hand how infants learn a sense of object permanence and trust through the all-time favorite peek-a-boo game (Ross and Lollis, 1987); how very anxious preschoolers can work through potentially frightening and painful experiences through medical play (Kampe, 1988; McCue, 1988); or how first and second graders are able to accomplish schoolwork with depth and breadth when it is project oriented and based on their interests (Katz and Chard, 1989; Wassermann, 1990).

Traditionally, significant portions of the early childhood day are given over to play experiences (i.e., free play, outdoor play), and routine aspects of the schedule are enhanced with playful activities (such as singing while waiting turns or transforming clean-up chores into a game). This occurs primarily because early childhood professionals believe it is in the best interest of young children to engage in spontaneous play. At this time, guidelines from the National Association for the Education of Young Children (1987) and the Association for Childhood Education International (1988) reinforce the necessity of play in childhood and suggest play-oriented learning experiences as indicators of quality early educational programming. "Much of young children's learning takes place when they direct their own play activities" (Bredekamp, 1987, p. 3).

Just how early childhood professionals put play into practice in their settings, however, depends on more than a general belief in the importance of play in the lives of young children. As suggested by Diane Levin (1995), our specific view of the role of play in early childhood education is tied to our general understanding of how young children develop and learn. Those of us who share a constructivist perspective—that is, who see learning as an interactive process involving the construction of personal knowledge of the world—use play as the foundation upon which we build our early childhood programs. We provide ample time for play, rely on a

variety of play materials and activities, and utilize a curriculum that supports play. From the constructivist perspective, early childhood professionals are responsible for nurturing children's play in two ways: first, by providing a safe, developmentally appropriate and stimulating environment for play, and second, by enriching children's play experiences with additional materials, ideas, and problems at the appropriate time. This requires astute observation, thoughtful planning, careful preparation, and responsive participation on our part, and on the availability of concrete, relevant, and interesting materials for the children to use.

On the other hand, there are many early childhood professionals who prefer a more "romantic" perspective on play (Kohlberg and Mayer, 1972), taking a hands-off stance and seldom intervening in children's play activities. Those espousing this view consider it their responsibility to supply toys and other playthings and then to stand back and watch what happens. Most children can do well in such an environment because playing comes to them naturally. They have learned to play without adult instruction simply by having playthings and play activities available to them. But such an approach is not necessarily effective for the broader group of children in inclusive settings. For example, the presence alone of rice in the sand box or goop on the art table will do little to engage the preschooler who is tactilely sensitive and needs skilled encouragement to experiment with unfamiliar or unpleasant textures. And what happens to the child whose walker or wheelchair makes it difficult to chase a ball or rush outdoors with a group of peers who are busily planning their latest adventure scenario? If children's play is off limits to adults, then some children, particularly but not exclusively those with special needs, are also likely to be excluded rather than included in many play experiences. In such cases, neither the excluded nor the included children benefit, for the excluded have lost out on the play experience and the included have lost out on additional playmates.

These are the very reasons that traditionally play has had a less important role in early childhood special-education programs. Because children with disabilities often need more than the provision of play opportunities, many early childhood special-education professionals have relied heavily on behavioral methods, direct instruction, and individual therapies in their work (Linder, 1990). Within early

childhood special education, play is more likely to have served the purpose of skill reinforcement (Bordner and Berkley, 1992), and in some cases, the fostering of peer relations (Smith, 1992). Recently, as more and more young children with special needs have been placed in early childhood programs, the importance of being able to play with others has taken on new meaning for them and for the professionals who work with them. Yet, play for its own sake is relatively new to early childhood special educators. Unlike early childhood constructivists, early childhood special educators have generally been trained to use play time for incidental teaching rather than relying on it as a context for learning.

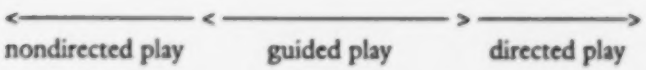
It is important to remember that play has held a less significant place in early childhood special-education settings for very good reasons. Learning through play does not come as easily or as naturally to many children with special needs. Early childhood special educators worry that play is not a sufficiently systematic or intensive learning method to ensure that the children enrolled in their settings will acquire the skills and knowledge they need (Widerstrom, 1983). In addition, although the research on the play of young children with special needs is limited, there is evidence to substantiate the qualitative and quantitative differences between the play of children with and without special needs. Most early childhood special educators recognize those differences immediately upon observing the play of typically developing children; the play of children in their programs tends to be less sophisticated, more functional, and less appealing to others (Odom, McConnell, and McEvoy, 1992). Thus, research data as well as personal experiences make it difficult for early childhood special educators to utilize play in the same fashion as their colleagues in early childhood settings.

How Can We Learn from Both Perspectives on Play?

We do not believe that any of the earlier positions on play alone can serve all children well. In early childhood and early childhood special-education settings, there have always been a few children for whom our philosophies of play have fallen short. Those settings in which professionals maintain a position on play that is totally child centered and spontaneous in nature can be problematic for children who have difficulties playing or who have few

previous group play experiences. Those settings that see play as secondary to learning can become problematic for children who learn through exploration, experimentation, and discovery. The reality is that different children benefit from different approaches to play. When early childhood and early childhood special-education programs served distinctly different populations, professionals may have been able to allow differing personal philosophies to dictate the role of play in their programs instead of children's needs. However, with an increasingly diverse range of children in inclusive settings, some of whom have identified disabilities, there is much more pressure on professionals to create and adapt programs that specifically meet the individual and collective needs of the children enrolled in them.

We think inclusive settings should utilize the best of both early childhood and early childhood special-education practices because they are neither early childhood nor early childhood special-education programs. Rather, they are inclusive programs developed to meet the needs of all enrollees. As such, they demand a perspective on play that can accommodate all children and professionals with a broad repertoire of play facilitation techniques. No longer are we mainstreaming or integrating children with special needs into existing early childhood programs; instead, we are creating new settings inclusive of all children. To foster play in inclusive settings, we need to rely upon the full range of perspectives on play that others have utilized successfully before us. One way to do that is to think about approaches to play along a continuum from nondirected to more directed, as suggested in the following diagram:



Using this continuum, adults responsible for children's play become more or less involved depending upon the needs of the children playing. The very same teacher may be nondirected with some children, guide play with others, and direct the play of yet another group. At the same time, she or he may find it necessary to adapt her participation in the children's play further, depending upon the type of play they are engaged in.

While such a continuum maximizes the options for intervention available to professionals, we recognize that it also presents us with challenges. As early childhood educators, steeped in traditional thinking about the sacred domain of play and embarking on efforts to make our settings more inclusive, we will be challenged by a new scenario in which play is no longer a natural given for all children. Those of us who are early childhood special educators and therapists steeped in behaviorism and direct instruction to ensure children's learning will be challenged by another group of children new to us, for whom play happens spontaneously and more richly without adult intervention. Together as inclusionists relying on the strengths of each other's perspectives and practices, we can make play work for all the children in our group.

How Should Play Look in Inclusive Settings?

A closer look at inclusive settings and the children enrolled in them is a beginning point for deciding how play should be incorporated. Generally speaking, inclusive early childhood settings welcome all young learners into their programs, are tailored to the specific population enrolled, and function as supportive communities for the adults as well as the children affiliated with them (adapted from Stainback and Stainback, 1992). They can be publicly or privately funded, follow one particular approach to educating young children (such as Montessori or HiScope) or be more eclectic, be organized for singular (such as nursery school) or multiple purposes (preschool, child care, parent-child groups, comprehensive services). Inclusive settings take on various forms, but the common theme among them is that all children are welcome as full and equal participants.

The young children enrolled in inclusive settings bring a range of physical attributes and psychological makeups, varied backgrounds and experiences, and a full complement of cognitive, social, emotional, and linguistic abilities and needs. In addition, some children have been diagnosed with special educational needs resulting from disabilities or handicaps. With or without special needs, all are accepted as children with individual profiles who share some common requirements (a safe environment, nurturing adults, interesting and appropriate learning experiences) but who also deserve specific accommodations and supports based on their

own needs (adaptive equipment, specialized instruction). Together, they form a community of learners, and in this paper, a community of playmates.

Given such a range of children within one setting, it becomes obvious that the team of professionals responsible for their care and education (whom we are calling inclusionists) needs an expansive perspective on play and a broad repertoire of strategies for facilitating play. Play, like other areas of child development, deserves our carefully shaped responses. That means addressing the inability of some children to initiate, enter, or sustain play and the likelihood of others to reciprocate appropriately.

Play in inclusive settings is still play. Although it is very difficult to define (Hughes, 1991), play is nonetheless easy to recognize when we see or experience it. If we observe children who are actively engaged and enjoying themselves, we assume that they are playing. Then, if we find they value the activity and have chosen to do it, we have further evidence that they are playing. Finally, if we note that they have their own rules for involvement, then we *know* they are playing. These same elements—active engagement, pleasure, intrinsic motivation, choice, spontaneity—are just as essential to play in inclusive settings.

As in other programs for young children, play in inclusive early childhood settings should provide children with ample opportunities to engage in different types of play, such as object, social, and sociodramatic play at different developmental stages (sensorimotor, constructive, dramatic, and rule governed) in a variety of social configurations—solitary, parallel, associative, and cooperative (Heidemann and Hewitt, 1992). Furthermore, sufficient time (Christie and Wardle, 1992) and an abundant supply of real materials (Schickedanz, 1977) should be available to enrich children's play experiences.

What does children's play look like in inclusive settings? Observation would undoubtedly reveal individuals and small groups of youngsters in different sections of the room pursuing various activities or enacting various scenarios. Two or three children may be creating structures with manipulatives; several may be building in the block corner; another may be "cooking" in the playhouse, and yet others may be "en route to a magic castle in the sky." Whatever the play agenda, no doubt the environment has

been carefully prepared by the early childhood practitioners to reflect the children's expressed interests and developmental levels. In addition, the practitioners have probably also planned ways to encourage and extend the children's thinking while they are playing.

The same developmentally appropriate practices that are incorporated in all high-quality early childhood programs are the foundation for play in inclusive settings. But integrated into such a play framework would be adaptive toys—with electronic switches and sound signals—to facilitate the participation of certain children, and social materials, such as parachutes, double easels, and floor puzzles, that would serve to enhance more interaction among children. (Many of these can be made or borrowed from toy libraries if they are not readily available in the program.)

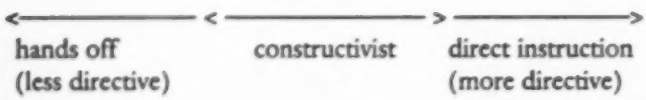
The major difference we might see in an inclusive setting would be the more active role of adults in the children's play. For if we are to be true to our strong beliefs about the way in which children learn through play, we must ensure that every child develops play skills and engages in play with others. A more hands-off approach to play in inclusive settings would merely perpetuate the status quo for some children. A new framework for adult involvement must accompany an expanded perspective.

How and When Should Inclusionists Intervene in Play?

Intervening to ensure that all children experience play in developmentally and individually appropriate ways is a complex task for inclusionists. In addition to being an observer of play, a preparer of the environment, a planner of activities, and a guide when children need one, the practitioner in an inclusive early childhood setting must also engage in ***delicately balancing intervention in play with letting play happen.*** It is our belief that many children with whom our hands-off approach to play seemed to have worked could have gained more from play experiences had we intervened a bit, and that many children whom we felt needed our direct intervention could have benefited from our stepping back and watching more. This is not to say that we should be more involved only in the play of children with special needs. Clearly, there are children whom we have all known who were not disabled in any particular way but

who had significant difficulties interacting, joining in, or maintaining play activities with their peers. They no more benefited from a less-directed approach to play than their peers with limitations. By the same token, there are some children with disabilities who, given an appropriate setting, interact, join in, and maintain play with their peers without our direct intervention. In reality, the approach to play that we use with various children should be determined by their play experiences in our settings rather than by their diagnoses or lack of them.

To decide when and how much to be involved in a child's play, we have found it helpful to think about types of intervention falling along a continuum similar to the one with a hands-off approach representing one end of the continuum, direct instruction representing the other, and a constructivist approach falling somewhere in between.



The inclusionist in an early childhood setting can then move along the continuum according to the needs of the children involved in play, being less directive when supports are not necessary and more directive when adult guidance enables participation, but always striving to manipulate the play environment and activities so that adult instruction is minimized. For example, in the block corner, where several children may be creating a replica of their neighborhood, it may seem at first glance that the only thing the teacher needs to do is to add a floor map to help children with the layout of the area. A subtle form of "scaffolding" the building experience, this intervention requires minimal additional adult involvement. However, as the play process continues, it may become obvious that other children need more assistance in organizing their involvement in the project, so the teacher may find it necessary to become more directive by helping these children decide where they will work or what role they might play. Finally, in an inclusive setting, it is likely that there will be at least one child who will require more direct instruction in the form of verbal directions or hand-over-hand assistance in order to contribute to the project. But not

all children require the same amount of intervention and the early childhood inclusionist in this case will find it necessary to move back and forth along the continuum of intervention to ensure that all children who want to participate in the block project are able to do so successfully.

From our point of view, knowing when to intervene is as important as knowing how. Such decisions will usually depend on the individual children and specific play experiences involved, but we would also suggest that certain predicaments demand the immediate attention of adults nearby: children on the periphery of exciting games and interactions, those whose limitations make it difficult for them to interact, and those who are unsure of how to react to new or different overtures from peers. Not only must we continue to observe carefully and to assess the quality of play and social interactions in our settings, but we must also be prepared to move swiftly to facilitate the entry of the child who cannot race to the other end of the playground and to support the continuation of play by the child whose words may be unintelligible to his peers.

Finding the right balance between intervening to facilitate play and pulling back to allow play to develop naturally, once our supportive gestures are no longer needed, will be a new skill for many inclusionists. More and more play facilitation techniques have been developed and documented by researchers (Linder, 1990; Smith, 1992). Not only must "inclusionists" be able to utilize a number of play facilitation techniques, but they must also make careful judgments about which technique seems most appropriate for a play situation. We suggest enlisting the collaborative support of colleagues, especially therapists and parents, in trying to pinpoint where on the continuum of intervention children need our input. Ensuring that all children become players and yet allowing play themes to emerge from the children themselves will take the combined efforts of several adults. Just as the provision of integrated therapies has demanded that we figure out new forms of interprofessional teamwork, so too facilitating learning through play in inclusive settings also requires new collaborations. The diverse skills and training of various professionals in conjunction with the intimate knowledge that families have of their children will make it possible for professionals to support play adequately. Collaboration

among professionals and families is crucial to play in inclusive early childhood programs, but a full discussion of its merits and pitfalls is beyond the scope of this paper. We would merely refer readers to the work of Idol, Nevin, and Paolucci-Whitcomb (1994) and Woodruff and McGonigel (1988) as starting points for thinking about this element of play in inclusive settings.

Supporting Inclusionists in Appropriate Play

The kind of interprofessional collaboration that we think is necessary to support play in inclusive settings requires that sufficient time and effort be devoted to teaming—time beyond that which is already devoted to planning together and coordinating with families. Extra time must also be allotted for sharing ideas, processing problems, and learning from each other. Without sufficient time for teaming, differences go unresolved, miscommunication results, and program quality suffers. In particular, we worry about two prevailing realities and warn about their potential destructiveness: First, teachers express concerns about the lack of time they have for professional responsibilities beyond the classroom (Marchant, 1995); second, inclusive settings are being created at a time when services and financial resources are being cut back (Beck, 1995). Maximizing children's play experiences in inclusive early childhood programs takes the combined expertise of educators, specialists, and families. Time must be set aside for this expertise to be shared, both when children are present and when they are not.

At this point, we also feel compelled to add briefly to current discussions on teacher preparation by supporting suggestions from others (Miller, 1992; Kemple, et. al., 1994) that call for unified professional preparation at the early childhood level. If we continue to train professionals in the traditional manner, which separates early childhood and early childhood special education, teaming and interprofessional collaboration will be a long time coming. Communicating and collaborating across disciplines must begin in training. As we have tried to show in this paper, facilitating play in inclusive settings requires multiple perspectives, intervention strategies, and roles for the adults involved. No one inclusionist can be expected to do it all, so while in training, early childhood profes-

sionals must grapple with their need to work with others. Making play happen for all young children is a complex task, one for teams of professionals and families.

Benefits of Intervening in Child Play

Supporting play in inclusive settings has benefits for children and adults. All children can learn more by participating in play in inclusive settings. Increased ability to share, respect for differences, understanding their own and others' limitations as well as strengths, among other gains, help children to become more caring members of their programs. Participation in a learning community that values all its members, and includes, respects, and nurtures everyone has lifelong benefits. Increased opportunities to be helpmates and to seek help from others has immeasurable effects on self-esteem. To see oneself as both helper and helpee lends a balance to a realistic view of oneself in the world as someone with both strengths and needs. Additionally, learning to understand, accept, and include those who are different can go a long way in managing conflicts, which so often result from misunderstanding of differences. In short, the opportunity to learn moral and ethical lessons in the inclusive setting are immense. These are lessons that can be added to the already established list of cognitive, social, and other benefits of play in children's development.

Teachers as well gain by expanding their skills in facilitating play among more children. Like their students, they learn new perspectives, become more comfortable with what is new and different, and experience being supportive and supported by colleagues in a shared endeavor. Early childhood inclusionists who have incorporated such views of play into their programs have reached new levels of understanding—of play, of young children, and of themselves.